THE NATION

LSD death probe yields few answers

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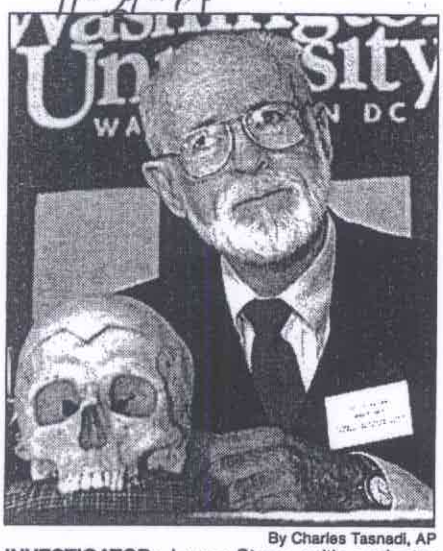
By Steve Marshall
USA TODAY

Just before 3 a.m. on Nov. 28, 1953, a man plummeted from Room 1018A of New York's Statler Hotel. That much is indisputable.

Now, after 41 years and a renewed forensic investigation using state-of-the-art computer simulation plus a new autopsy, the mystery into Frank Olson's death lingers — probably forever.

On Monday, forensic researcher James Starrs said he can't disprove the government's assertion that Olson, 43, a germ warfare researcher, leaped to his death in a fit of despair after the CIA gave him a test dose of LSD in a mind-control study called MK-ULTRA at the height of the Cold War.



By Charles Tasnadi, AP

INVESTIGATOR: James Starrs, with a plaster cast of the victim's skull, can't prove murder.

CIA spokesman David Christian, calling the death "a tragic event," said Olson's death was extensively investigated in the 1970s. In 1974, President Ford apologized to the Olson family and the federal government awarded the family $750,000.

Eric Olson initiated the probe about a year ago by contacting Starrs, who has conducted forensic investigations into the deaths of explorer Meriwether Lewis, the ax-murdered parents of Lizzie Borden and, Carl Weiss, blamed in the 1935 killing of Louisiana Sen. Huey Long.

Now, said Eric Olson, "I want to study the report and consider what I'm going to do." Olson, 49, a psychologist in Frederick, Md., who was 9 when his father died, says the event was "something from which, in a lot of ways, I've never recovered."

There were no cuts from window glass on Olson's body, said Starrs, a professor of law and forensic science at George Washington University.

But the six-month investigation into Olson's death was inconclusive.

"We didn't find any smoking gun," Starrs said. But he said government officials' contradictory statements and refusal to disclose details about Olson's death suggest homicide.

"There's nothing so obvious that it leaps right out at you," said Starrs, who led the investigation, "but there is no question he has a distinctly suspicious bump over the left eye and every member of my team agrees it has the possibility of being the site where he may have been struck by another person in the process of throwing him out the window."

Because Olson's body was transported across state lines, it was extremely well-embalmed, as is customary, said Starrs — a stroke of luck for investigators.

Still pending are results of hair analysis to show if LSD or other drugs were present at the time of Olson's death, Starrs said.

Nine days before Olson's death, a CIA scientist spiked Olson's after-dinner drink with LSD at a secret Maryland retreat, and the normally gregarious Olson became depressed.

The CIA transported Olson to New York City to meet one of the few doctors then knowledgable about LSD-related behavior. Two nights before he died, Olson tossed away his wallet and wandered the streets before being found sitting in the hotel lobby the next morning.

Then-hotel manager Armond Pastore's opinion: "Being in the hotel business my whole life, I never heard of anybody jumping through a closed window with the shade pulled."

Starr's priority now, he says, is reburying Olson's remains.

His scientific study of the case will continue, but he said, "I think we've done everything that can be done for the family."